



## **Aftershock**

### **reflections on the politics of reconstruction in Northern Gorkha**

Bennike, Rune Bolding

*Published in:*  
Himalaya

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Document license:*  
[CC BY-NC-ND](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Bennike, R. B. (2017). Aftershock: reflections on the politics of reconstruction in Northern Gorkha. *Himalaya*, 37(2), 55-64. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss2/9>

December 2017

# Aftershock: Reflections on the Politics of Reconstruction in Northern Gorkha

Rune Bolding Bennike

University of Copenhagen, [runebennike@gmail.com](mailto:runebennike@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

## Recommended Citation

Bennike, Rune Bolding (2017) "Aftershock: Reflections on the Politics of Reconstruction in Northern Gorkha," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss2/9>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Perspectives is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized

---

# Aftershock: Reflections on the Politics of Reconstruction in Northern Gorkha

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Geoff Childs and colleagues at the Rule and Rupture Research Program as well as one anonymous reviewer for incisive comments to drafts of the article. Research for the article was supported by the European Research Council.

# Aftershock: Reflections on the Politics of Reconstruction in Northern Gorkha

Rune Bennike

Many commentators have described the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal either (1) through the notion that 'nothing is going on' in regards to post-quake reconstruction; or (2) through a celebration of grassroots resilience and urban entrepreneurship in the face of disaster and state neglect. In this article, I draw on observations from Kutang and Nubri in the mountains of northern Gorkha District to argue that neither of these descriptions is fully accurate. Even in this remote and inaccessible area, much was being done in the aftermath of disaster, and a great deal of this activity diverges, in multiple ways, from the notions of spontaneous egalitarianism that are often associated with 'resilience.'

I describe the fraught politics involved in distributing relief aid in a village where the local government has been non-existent for years;

the active positioning of new political players on the local scene; and the economic inequalities that can arise from unlucky positioning along geological fault-lines, a recently booming tourist economy, and the specificities of the Nepali government's post-disaster compensation schemes. This article sketches out the anatomy of disaster 'aftershock' as a political environment rife with opportunity, bias, and unintended consequences. As scholars and interested observers of Nepal and the Himalaya, we need to pay close attention to this environment and its potentially unequal outcomes that reverberate past this present moment of taking stock.

**Keywords:** Nepal, earthquake, aftershock, reconstruction, politics.

## Introduction

On April 25th 2015, an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter Scale shook the Himalaya. Over the following months, the initial quake was followed by a range of aftershocks that seemed never-ending, and which kept many inhabitants of the region in a drawn-out state of terror. Soon after the initial quake, international donors pledged over \$4 billion to be used for post-earthquake reconstruction to the Nepalese government. Nonetheless, 'reconstruction' in the aftermath of this disaster has extensively been characterized by notions of slowness and inactivity. It took the government almost a year to begin disbursing reconstruction funds in earnest; in fact, the distribution is still ongoing at the time of writing this article (June 2017)—two years after the funds were pledged. In the absence of swift action on the side of the government, many commentators—journalists and academics alike—describe the aftermath of the earthquake as either a state of inactivity or a stage for grassroots resilience in the face of disaster and state neglect. In this article, I draw on observations from Kutang and Nubri, located in the mountains of northern Gorkha District<sup>1</sup> (a mere 30 kilometers, or 19 miles, from the epicenter of the first major earthquake) to argue that neither of these descriptions is fully accurate. Even in this remote and inaccessible area, a great deal was going on in the aftermath of disaster, and much of this activity diverges, in multiple ways, from the notions of spontaneous egalitarianism that are often associated with 'resilience.'

This article explores the anatomy of 'aftershock'—as a social and political phenomenon rather than a seismic one. In the wake of disaster, as relief aid and reconstruction funding has poured into Nepal, a multitude of political and economic, as well as personal and social, transformations are taking place. Following disasters in other times and places, people often refer to this 'aftershock' as a 'second earthquake' or a 'tsunami after the tsunami.' As such expressions indicate, the magnitude of these post-disaster changes is easily perceived as being on par with that of the disaster itself. The aftershock speeds up, intensifies and—sometimes—alters the existing social structures and processes of change. To give one obvious example, after seven years of political deadlock, the aftershock environment facilitated the making of a new, and controversial, constitution for Nepal. This article addresses some of the dynamics taking place in the aftershock through a range of both firsthand observations and analyses of ongoing public debates. As I illustrate, these dynamics move things around in less predictable ways than what mainstream narratives of post-disaster reconstruction tend to suggest.

## While 'Nothing is Going On': Public Debate and Mainstream Approaches to Post-Disaster

Dominant discourses about disaster allows us to believe that we understand what has happened and what is to be done. Such intellectual and moral entrapment obscures much of what actually takes place in the name of reconstruction. (Simpson 2013: 267)

As one might expect, the earthquake sparked a lot of debate among Nepal anthropologists—readers of this journal—as well as other engaged intellectuals and journalists. Much of the debate was highly sensitive to the complex processes that were continuously unfolding. We were reminded of the fact that the earthquake was also a 'class-quake,' generally hitting the poor (such as the migrant workers living in unsafe hostels near the Gongabu bus park in the northwestern outskirts of Kathmandu) harder than the rich. We were also reminded of the various sources and forms of resilience displayed in the aftermath of disaster; the potential pitfalls in celebrating resilience in the face of government neglect; and the difficult balancing act involved in choosing whether to work *with* or *around* the government in relief and reconstruction (Nelson 2015; Leve 2015; Sander et al. 2015; Tamang 2015).

Despite these sensitivities, parts of the debate seemed distinctly at odds with what I was seeing take place in northern Gorkha. One of the things I found most striking was the persistent narrative that nothing, really, was going on in Nepal in terms of reconstruction. For instance, at the South Asia Conference at the University of Wisconsin—Madison in October 2015 participants in a roundtable discussion on the earthquake kept repeating the same laments that were prevalent in Nepali and international news media that none of the over \$4 billion that international donors pledged to the Nepali state for post-earthquake reconstruction had yet been distributed. While this was certainly true at the time and highly problematic, many people seemed to equate this inactivity on the side of formal, state-led reconstruction with a total lack of reconstruction. Due to the very tangible, infrastructural challenges involved in getting assistance into the area, northern Gorkha was often described as a place 'not yet reached' by aid. There was some truth to this claim, of course. The mountainous environment did provide major obstacles to the distribution of relief materials. However, this condition did not equate with inactivity and the lack of reconstruction. In fact, in an area where the presence of the state has always been rather thin, a combination of local initiative and transnational non-state networks had immediately been mobilized to raise funds for relief

and reconstruction outside the ambit of formal initiatives led by government and international relief organizations. Here, the reconstruction of houses was well underway within weeks of the first quake.

The tendency to describe places like northern Gorkha in terms of their inactivity—despite such reconstruction initiatives—is telling. First, the diagnosis resonates eerily with prevalent narratives that characterize the high Himalaya in terms of its remoteness and developmental backwardness (Hussain 2015; Pigg 1992). Second, it fits well with mainstream approaches to post-disaster reconstruction that tend to operate on the basis of a simple cause and effect relationship.<sup>2</sup> This approach is clearly reflected in the now globally standardized formats of the Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) framework.<sup>3</sup> Here, the earthquake is the cause and its effects are summarized in terms of ‘damages’ and ‘economic losses’ (GoN 2015). With this simple formula, the effects of the 2015 Himalayan earthquake can be counted and evaluated on exactly the same basis as the Haiti earthquake or the Pakistan floods. The framework of this formula thus speaks to a *tabula rasa* imagination of disaster, where disasters wipe clean the slate of society so that post-disaster interventions can be planned in the same way whether they are operating in the high Himalaya of Nepal or the Caribbean island of Haiti. In fact, many of the international specialists who began to stream into Nepal after the quake seemed to be selected for the job specifically because of their past experience in Haiti.

As in other post-disaster situations (Simpson and Serafini 2015: 17), the Nepal PDNA was an extremely rough and hasty product. For instance, a friend and I were suddenly invited into the World Bank office to comment on their estimates for damage to the tourism sector based on our severely limited experience working in Gorkha after the earthquake. There were only a few days to the deadline and the Bank needed to come up with some figures. The ministries and international agencies involved in the PDNA obviously did whatever they could to get the most accurate estimates, but given the chaos of the aftermath and the haste of the exercise (the PDNA needed to be incorporated into an overdue financial bill to be passed by parliament), the results seemed close to guesswork. Nevertheless, as soon as the PDNA was released, it assumed the appearance of a total analysis. In Simpson’s words, it ‘allows us to believe that we understand what has happened and what is to be done’ (Simpson 2013: 267, see also Simpson and Serafini 2015). Hence, while the PDNA and mainstream cause-and-effect approaches provide a convenient baseline for the international relief industry, they obscure a good deal of what is actually going on.

As a consequence, a multitude of less formalized initiatives, such as those in northern Gorkha, tend to either disappear from view or, if they appear, be read through the lens of grassroots resilience. However, as this article describes, such initiatives do have consequences, and there is a lot more to reconstruction and compensation than the reestablishment of a *status quo ex-ante* or ‘building back better’ than mainstream approaches to disaster relief seem to indicate.<sup>4</sup> What I suggest is that the aftershock moves things around in much less predictable ways than what is imagined here. Disasters do not provide clean slates. They are substantially shaped in the image of the societies they impact. The aftershock interacts with past power structures, but it does not necessarily replicate them in a one-to-one fashion. Novel opportunities for fundraising and the increasing inflow of resources following disaster accelerates and intensifies ongoing processes of change and may heighten the stakes of how political games play out in existing social structures. In the aftershock, opportunities and misfortunes are created in a shifting playing field of complex negotiations of position. The aftershock, in other words, shakes things up in ways that cannot be adequately articulated through mainstream notions of disaster assessments, reconstruction or compensation.

### A Note on Positionality

My starting point for writing this article is personal. It had never crossed my mind that I would, suddenly, be reflecting on disaster and doing research on post-disaster transformation. But I was in Kathmandu when the earthquake hit. The stories that I tell in this article stem from my experience of post-disaster from this highly-engaged position. Like many others, it took me a few days to get my bearings, as I was thoroughly shaken and scared, like everyone else. I needed to figure out what had happened and what was going on. Once my fears subsided, I contacted some friends from my ongoing research on tourism development in northern Gorkha. They were in Kathmandu, and were already in full swing, calling friends and relatives. In some places phone connections were gone, in other places they had never been established, but here and there, my friends were able to receive news from the area. Working out of Sonam’s trekking agency, we began collecting information more systematically. Over the following six weeks, we worked closely together. Realizing we had the best information about this remote area available at the time, we created online spreadsheets with organized and updated information about the seven Village Development Committees (VDC) in the Manaslu Conservation Area (MCA). Through our connections in the area we tried to match local needs with the inflow of

aid, and when the major relief organization finally came up to speed, almost a month after the first earthquake, we handed over as much information as we possibly could.

What we are dealing with here is participant-observation with a clear emphasis on *participation*. My academic reflections have mostly come later, after I returned from Nepal. Since I left the country in early July 2015, I have been back twice: for a two-week visit in January 2016 and a six-week stay in November–December 2016. These visits have been enlightening for the glimpses they have given me of the aftershock as a continuously unfolding reality. In January 2015, Nepal's new contentious constitution was passed, and the country was still in the grip of the fuel blockade that followed its promulgation. In November and December of 2015 public debate was filled with discussions about '*tin lakh*'—the Nepal Reconstruction Authority's promise to provide Nrs. 300,000 to each household whose house was fully damaged during the earthquake.

Each visit gave me a new perspective on what the aftershock of disaster means. In my mind, however, the aftershock remains confusing. I feel that what I'm writing now might be countered, again, in a month or two; that the aftershock continues its churning that creates new forms of political potentiality past the present moment of stocktaking. Thus, what I write here is more a critique of false certainties and clear-cut causalities than an assertion of a new argument set in stone. What I emphasize is the fluidity of the aftershock as a transformative political-economic environment.

### Relief and the Politics of Distribution: 'It's All Logistics'<sup>5</sup>

Disasters are made to appear as logistical problems which demand intervention and legitimate trespass. (Simpson 2013: 266)

Post-disaster environments can produce a resource bubble where the 'need to spend' and to display efficiency to donors may easily override concerns with coordination, local ownership and genuine needs in the name of relief (Stirrat 2006). In northern Gorkha, from early on relief efforts were framed largely as a technical matter and spoken about in terms of terrain, infrastructure and the possible 'throughput' of resources. While these were obvious and legitimate issues in a Himalayan environment, they largely overshadowed other social and political concerns among many of the responding actors. Although the past half century of Nepali history vividly attests to the fact that ensuring a fair and productive distribution of

foreign development resources is a massive challenge rife with the potential for persistent unintended consequences (Pigg 1992; 1993; Bista 1991; Fujikura 2001; Bennike 2015b), in the aftershock of disaster all concerns with the issues of 'giving' seemed suddenly to have been swept away.<sup>6</sup> The urgency and moral imperatives of post-disaster humanism superimposed flat, universal notions of suffering (and resilience) onto a political and social landscape that was, if anything, even more complicated than before the quake.

Some twelve days after the first quake struck the Himalaya, my friend Nyima had raised funds from a group of German donors to bring relief materials to Bihi VDC and to further assess the situation in the area. Bihi had never been connected to the mobile phone networks, which span most of the Budhi Gandaki river valley, and information about the area's state was sparse in Kathmandu. Hence, we didn't know what to expect as we boarded the helicopter for Bihi, which was also Nyima's home. The following six days in the area were incredible instructive. We learned a great deal about the discrepancies between the needs of the area and the general post-disaster discourse in Kathmandu, and about the fraught interface between relief distribution and contentious local politics.<sup>7</sup>

At the time, tin roofing and the construction of semi-permanent housing was the main focus for most responding relief agencies. References to the haunting images of disaster victims in Haiti and elsewhere, living under tattered tarps years after previous disasters, fueled this discourse, and the upcoming monsoon provided a clear sense of urgency. However, this articulation of 'local needs' was distinctly at odds with realities in northern Gorkha. Constructed of local materials, wood and stacked stones without mortar, the houses here were quickly rebuilt through local initiatives. Little outside support was needed for these rebuilding projects. Every village seemed to have someone skilled enough to oversee the reconstruction. As we arrived in Bihi, a group of about ten men had come together and were rebuilding damaged houses at the rapid pace of two per day. CGI roofing was welcomed as a replacement for worn-out or damaged roofs made of wooden planks or slate, but it was not essential. Most houses would be fit for habitation before the rains and when I returned in 2016 many were indeed improved.

There were other issues, however. Although remote areas are often regarded as places of subsistence livelihood, the Manaslu area has historically been characterized by a high degree of trade and mobility (Childs 2004). As the earthquake had provoked a number of major landslides, the





Figure 1. House under reconstruction shortly after the first major earthquake.

(Bennike, 2015)

trail that provides the lifeline to the area had been broken. Foods usually brought from the bazaar in Arughat, which is a three-day walk downstream, were in short supply. For a while, people had stores of local foods (e.g. corn, barley, millet, potatoes) on which to survive, but their stocks of rice, lentils, salt, tea, and milk powder were quickly depleted. Everything coming into the area had to be transported by helicopter, a process that was both costly and inefficient. Hence, the priority for people in the area was not the usual relief materials, but was in fact the reopening of the trail.

The distribution of the relief materials that did trickle into Bihi, loaded into small helicopters was a complicated political affair. With local elections suspended for almost two decades, no formally legitimate local bodies existed to which to turn. In this vacuum, a local leader and former VDC head had, it was persistently rumored, made Bihi into his own little fiefdom, 'eating' development funding channeled through the state administration and controlling local politics with a heavy hand. However, at the time of the earthquake, he was hospitalized in Kathmandu and thus out of touch with what was going on in Bihi. With no formal structures of authority in place and the old leader out of the village, the distribution of external resources for relief called for local institutional innovation.

When we arrived, an ad hoc group of Bihi locals had emerged to take charge. Formed partly by people opposed to the old rule in the village, this group was something new. For them, it seemed, the aftershock of the earthquake provided an opportunity to show themselves as people

committed to the common good of the village. They threw themselves with great energy at the complicated task of fairly distributing meager rations of rice, lentils, biscuits, noodles and tarps. The questions facing them, however, were many and highly political. Were the materials to be distributed uniformly across the local residents or on the basis of their needs? Should households or individuals be the basic unit for distribution? When was the right time to begin distribution? And how could a fair distribution be ensured when resources arrived piecemeal, in different localities across the VDC, and often without any prior notice?

On distribution day, the complexity of their task was vividly illustrated by a curious scene beginning with the familiar humming sound of an approaching helicopter. Just as the distribution was about to begin, the helicopter swept into the village, blowing dust on the materials that were laid out for distribution in front of the village mill. It was the World Food Programme (WFP). Through a quick succession of questions addressed to the people who had gathered around him, the WFP representative ascertained what seemed to be a foregone conclusion: that the agency would supply large quantities of rice to the households in the VDC. Five minutes later, they were gone again, but the visit had palpably illustrated how the ever-uncertain horizon of future relief arrivals complicated distribution.

Even though dealing with the influx of relief material was a complicated political affair in the village, for the WFP it was mainly a logistical matter. As one representative stated, 'In Nepal, we are working in some of the





Figure 2. Small measures of *dal* handed out on distribution day in Bihi.

(Bennike, 2015)

most difficult terrain in the world, and the challenge will be compounded by the monsoon' (Dixit 2015). Under what became known as Operation Mountain Express, the agency made an agreement with the Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal and the Nepal Mountaineering Association to hire up to 20,000 porters and mules in order to 'repair the damaged trails and transport 4,000 metric tons (MT) of food and relief items.'<sup>8</sup> The WFP and partners approached this operation with clear professionalism; for instance, employing a professional film crew to document their work<sup>9</sup> and producing a 'subway map' that specifies 'staging areas,' 'transportations corridors' and a 'through-put' measured in metric tons per month (MT/mth). Nonetheless, the whole operation was framed exclusively as a matter of most efficiently pouring resources into the area across an incredibly challenging physical terrain; all reflections about the complicated social, political and economic landscapes into which these resources were inserted seemed wiped away.

Apart from this disregard for the local complexities of patronage politics, the operation held the potential for unintended economic consequences. As part of the WFP operations, the main trail through the Manaslu area was surveyed by a Swiss/Nepali team some weeks after the earthquake. The geologist's conclusion was clear: the main trail was situated on a fault line in the landscape and highly prone to landslides. Subsequently, plans were made for an alternative trail into the area that included high paths on the other (eastern) side of the Budhi Gandaki River. This trail would be much safer, and WFP set to work developing the trail to a standard they could use for food

distribution to the area. However, the choice of shifting the trail—which was made with reference to logistics and safety and pushed through under the urgency of post-disaster relief—held the potential for massive unintended consequences in relation to the local economy. As an up-and-coming tourist area, the Budhi Gandaki river valley has seen rapid investment in tourism infrastructure over the past 6-7 years. The realignment of the trail would mean that a great deal of people who had spent all their savings and taken loans to build tourist lodges on the western side of the river in anticipation of a future rise in tourism would now be by-passed. And with a government compensation scheme purely focused on damaged houses, the economic loss of these people was not accounted for. For a while, it looked like this would be the consequence, but by November 2016, the old trail was back in use. To the relief of local small-scale tourism businesses, trekkers and locals alike seemed to have deemed the safe, high trail too cumbersome to use.

### Reconstruction: Opportunities for Good Work

The emotive language of suffering, aid, and rehabilitation is generally difficult to argue with head on: what could be wrong with 'good work'? (Simpson 2013: 266)

The earthquake created new opportunities for fundraising and opened up peripheral areas, such as northern Gorkha, to a host of new organizations and an increased influx of resources. Following the initial focus on logistics and relief, the emphasis shifted to reconstruction. While the govern-

ment's National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) moved slowly towards the distribution of reconstruction funds they were steeped in political infighting, and other organizations took the opportunity to scale up their operations in northern Gorkha—among these Christian organizations such as World Vision, Christian Relief Services, and Mountain Child. When I visited in November and December 2016, the resource influx and need to spend was tangible. Christian Relief Services tarps were piled high in many houses; World Vision had just completed the distribution of Nrs. 45,000 in cash to each household throughout the area; and Mountain Child had established a pre-school in Samagaon and were working on the reconstruction of a school in Ghap.

For these organizations, the earthquake had provided a major opportunity. As the founder of MC candidly stated in an appeal for funding shortly after the earthquake, the situation provided 'an unprecedented opportunity to unfold God's pervasive grace upon areas that have only known martyrdom in the past (...) now is the time to hoist the flag of God's kingdom at the top of the world.'<sup>10</sup> It is hard to foresee the consequences of such interweaving between the urgencies of disaster reconstruction and Christian proselytization among communities of Tibetan Buddhists, but judging from other post-disaster contexts, they may be both insidious and persistent (Simpson 2013; Simpson and Serafini 2015: 16).

The influx of resources provided some local people with new opportunities. The organizations that were scaling up their operations needed new, local employees. Here, the aftershock of disaster sped up existing processes of change. Good language skills, especially in English, were already a means to mobility among young people before the earthquake through employment as trekking guides, etc. After the earthquake, many of these young people were now offered positions as local 'coordinators' or 'mobilizers' in various reconstruction projects. For some people, it was suddenly possible to earn a decent wage for very little work<sup>11</sup> while staying in the village and only undertaking occasional visits to Gorkha or Kathmandu to report or participate in 'training' events. My friend, Nyima, who had travelled with me to Bihi after the earthquake, maintained connections to some German donors. Employed by the new German-funded 'Initiative Nepal Kids' (INK), he is now overseeing the construction of a school in Bihi and splitting his time between Kathmandu and Bihi. Another friend, Tashi, who went with me to Bihi in late 2016, had just finished a temporary contract working for WV on their cash distribution program. Tashi's friend, Yeshe, who

we met *en route*, was working for a local NGO contracted by CRS to do recovery and reconstruction work in the area. All trained as trekking guides, these smart young boys had found new opportunities in the aftershock.

Back in Bihi, the aftershock had also accelerated existing infrastructural developments. When I returned in November 2016, changes were clearly visible. As many locals told me, the village had become '*bikasi*' (developed) in the very tangible ways that are often emphasized in Nepali public discourse: the hydro-power supply that had been damaged in the earthquake had been re-established, providing a steady supply of power to the village; new water taps had been installed in every ward and a toilet built for every household; a new, big health post had been established; and a school building, as well as a private hotel, was under construction; last, but not least, a mobile tower had been erected just after the earthquake so that this part of the river valley was also, now, connected to the outside world via cheap and accessible mobile phones. Many of these development projects had been planned well before the earthquake, but had suddenly been accomplished in the rush of reconstruction work after the earthquake. Furthermore, villagers themselves had privately chosen to utilize some of the cash distributed after the earthquake to fly CGI sheets for roofing and toilets in by helicopter and some were planning to spend the expected government reconstruction funds to build small 'home-stay' houses for future tourist.

The aftershock also reverberated in local politics. One villager, rumored to have been associated with the heavy-handed rule of the past, had emerged as the de-facto leader of development initiatives in the village. He told me how Bihi used to be regarded as a bad, less developed place compared to most other villages in the area. Now, it was going to be different. Things were changing in Bihi, and he wanted it to be regarded as a 'model VDC.' Soon after the earthquake when I visited the village with relief materials, this individual had been leading the group of villagers that went around to rebuild houses. Later, his skills had made him a central person for the construction of the school in collaboration with INK. He has a good command of Nepali (in addition to the local dialects of Tibetan) and had converted to Christianity some years before the earthquake. He was now the go-to person in the village for development. He was doing 'good work.' Some villagers, however, were skeptical. The memories of the past were still fresh, and they were waiting to see whether this man was as good on the 'inside' as he expressed on the 'outside' at the current moment.

New opportunities emerged in Kathmandu, too. Sonam, out of whose office we began coordinating relief to northern Gorkha quickly after the disaster, is now heavily involved in reconstruction work. Sometime after the earthquake, he registered the relief network we had established as a fully-fledged NGO.<sup>12</sup> While Sonam was already running a successful trekking business before the earthquake, the aftershock has placed him in a unique position. Educated as an emergency architect from a European university, and with extensive experience in activism for the protection of cultural heritage in the mountains, Sonam has become a crucial figure for reconstruction projects in northern Gorkha and beyond. In January 2016, his office was overseeing the reconstruction of six schools and health posts northern Gorkha—some with full responsibility, others on a consultancy basis. By November 2016, several additional projects had been included in the portfolio. Sonam is now renting the office across the hall from his trekking agency in Boudha for the NGO, and overhead funds from the various projects have allowed him to employ several friends as well as a few volunteer interns. Throughout his work, Sonam has been struggling against a persistent bias on the side of the government to think of reconstruction solely in terms of reinforced concrete buildings, (much like in post-earthquake Gujarat, see Simpson and Serafini 2015). His design for the school in Bihi is now presented as a model for earthquake resistant reconstruction with local materials, but there were many bureaucratic hassles to get there.

## Reverberations

The small fragments of post-disaster experience described in this article provide a glimpse into ‘aftershock’ as a continuously evolving scenario. Far from the clear-cut notions of cause and effect so fundamental to post-disaster response, the aftershock is rife with opportunity, bias and unintended consequences. As the aftershock continues to reverberate in the political, economic and social fabrics of Nepali society, no strict conclusions can be drawn from the present moment. What is evident, however, is that a whole lot of different things take place ‘in the name of reconstruction’ (Simpson 2013: 267)—even when the state ostensibly does nothing. As the moral imperatives of disaster encourages a major inflow of resources to towns and villages across the Himalaya, local politics are infused with new stakes. Opportunities arise for those who happen to be in the right position or manage to seek that position in the aftermath. Others might be bypassed by the new trails of development or fall between the cracks of compensation schemes. Disparate factors such as religion, occupation, education, language skills and social networks—even local-

ity during an earthquake—can affect this. As scholars and interested observers of Nepal and the Himalaya, we need to pay close attention to these processes and their potentially unequal outcomes in the years to come.

In high Himalayan places such as northern Gorkha District, the aftershock of disaster is interacting with existing processes of change in multiple, open-ended ways. As many other ‘poor’ countries across the world, in the past years Nepal has been betting heavily on tourism as a route to economic development (GoN 2009, 2010). However, plummeting tourist numbers after the earthquake are now highlighting the vulnerability of tourism as a route to economic development. Over the past decade, the Manaslu circuit in northern Gorkha has been promoted as an up-and-coming tourist destination, destined to become the ‘next Annapurna.’ Nonetheless, locals currently seem hesitant. In 2015, a total of 2,414 international trekkers visited the area, down from 5,918 the year before. Will the numbers go up again? Furthermore, while infrastructural development—roads and dams—were a cornerstone of Nepali developmental imaginaries even before the earthquake, the aftershock has, if anything, reinforced this focus. However, as illustrated by recent years’ developments in Annapurna, the extension of road networks deep into and across the Himalayan range can run counter to the promotion of eco-nature and trekking tourism. In the meantime, the young people who are currently working well-paid jobs in the reconstruction industry may be out of work soon again, when the funds dry up and the spotlight moves elsewhere. What will be their position when this happens?

**Rune Bennike** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Food and Resource Economics, University of Copenhagen. He is currently conducting research on the formation of local political authority in rural Nepal as part of the *Rule and Rupture* research program as well as working on the individual research project *Aftershock: Nature, Tourism and the Political Economy of Post-Disaster*.

The author would like to thank Geoff Childs and colleagues at the Rule and Rupture Research Program as well as one anonymous reviewer for incisive comments to drafts of the article. Research for the article was supported by the European Research Council.

## Endnotes

1. Under the new federal structure in Nepal, effective from March 10, 2017, this area lies under the Tsum-Nubri *gaon palika* within province no. 4.
2. See e.g. (Albala-Bertrand 1993, Guha-Sapir, Santos, and Borde 2013, Hallegatte and Przyluski 2010, Cohen and Werker 2008, Mochizuki et al. 2014).
3. <<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/crisis-prevention-and-recovery/pdna.html>> (accessed on March 13, 2017).
4. <<http://www.wcdrr.org/uploads/Reconstructing-after-disasters-Build-back-better.pdf>> (accessed on March 13, 2017).
5. Title from Nepali Times blog post: <<http://nepalitimes.com/blogs/mycity/2015/06/14/its-all-logistics/>> (accessed on March 13, 2017).
6. Korf et al. 2010.
7. For a short ethnographic description of relief distribution in Bihi see (Bennike 2015a).
8. <<http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ep/wfp275230.pdf>> (accessed on 13 March, 2017).
9. <<https://vimeo.com/fenomcreative>>, <<http://www.nepalbeyondtheclouds.com/>> (accessed on March 13, 2017).
10. The appeal is accessible here <<http://www.betweenersmons.com/2015/04/help-for-nepal/>> and here <<http://asiaharvest.org/nepal-update-help-is-on-the-way/>> (both accessed on March 13, 2017).
11. In 2016, I was quoted salaries between Nrs. 25 and 30,000 for work amounting to an average of one day a week.

12. <<http://tsumnubri.org/>>.

## References

- Albala-Bertrand, J. M. 1993. *Political economy of large natural disasters: with special reference to developing countries*: Oxford University Press.
- Bennike, Rune Bolding. 2015a. Distribution Day. *Himal Southasian*.
- Bennike, Rune Bolding. 2015b. Textbook Difference: Spatial History and National Education in Panchayat and Present-day Nepal. *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 52 (1): 53-78.
- Bista, Dor Bahadur. 1991. *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization*. Madras: Sangam Books Ltd.
- Childs, Geoff H. 2004. *Tibetan diary : from birth to death and beyond in a Himalayan valley of Nepal*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, Charles, and Eric Werker. 2008. The Political Economy of "Natural" Disasters. In *Working Paper*: Harvard Business School.
- Dixit, Kunda. 2015. Operation Mountain Express. *Nepali Times*, 19-25 June.
- Fujikura, Tatsuro. 2001. Discourses of Awareness: Notes for a Criticism of Development in Nepal. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 6 (2): 271-313.
- GoN. 2009. *Tourism Vision 2020*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation.
- GoN. 2010. *Nepal Trade Integration Strategy 2010*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Commerce and Supplies, Government of Nepal.
- GoN. 2015. *Nepal Earthquake 2015: Post Disaster Needs Assessment*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission.
- Guha-Sapir, Debarati, Indhira Santos, and Alexandre Borde. 2013. *The economic impacts of natural disasters*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hallegatte, Stéphane, and Valentin Przyluski. 2010. The Economics of Natural Disasters: Concepts and Methods. In *Policy Research Working Paper*: The World Bank.



- Hussain, Shafqat. 2015. *Remoteness and modernity: transformation and continuity in northern Pakistan*, Yale Agrarian Studies Series. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Korf, B., S. Habullah, P. Hollenbach, and B. Klem. 2010. The gift of disaster: the commodification of good intentions in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. *Disasters* 34: S60-S77. doi: 10.1111/j.0361-3666.2009.01099.x.
- Leve, Lauren. 2015. Strength, security, resilience and Nepal's great earthquake. *Anthropology News* 56 (6): e1-e7.
- Mochizuki, Junko, Reinhard Mechler, Stefan Hochrainer-Stigler, Adriana Keating, and Keith Williges. 2014. Revisiting the 'disaster and development' debate—Toward a broader understanding of macroeconomic risk and resilience. *Climate Risk Management* 3: 39-54.
- Nelson, Andrew. 2015. Classquake: What the global media missed in Nepal earthquake coverage. accessed 8 March. <<http://theconversation.com/classquake-what-the-global-media-missed-in-nepal-earthquake-coverage-41063>>.
- Pigg, Stacy Leigh. 1992. Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (3): 491-513.
- Pigg, Stacy Leigh. 1993. Unintended Consequences: The Ideological Impact of Development in Nepal. *South Asia Bulletin* 13 (1 & 2): 45-58.
- Sander, Catherine, Kimber Haddix McKay, Angjuk Lama, and Pralhad Dhakal. 2015. Pro-Government' Is Not 'Pro-Corruption' in the Aftermath of the Nepal Earthquakes. *Anthropology News* 56 (6).
- Simpson, Edward. 2013. *The political biography of an earthquake: aftermath and amnesia in Gujarat, India*. London: Hurst.
- Simpson, Edward, and Michele Serafini. 2015. The Neoliberal Aftershock. *Himal Southasian*, 12-52.
- Stirrat, Jock. 2006. Competitive humanitarianism: relief and the tsunami in Sri Lanka. *Anthropology Today* 22 (5): 11-16.
- Tamang, Seira. 2015. Dangers of Resilience. *The Kathmandu Post*, May 25.